

Testimony HB 191

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My name is Gina Wiest and I am the Executive Director of the Lewis & Clark Humane Society in Helena. I have 15 years animal welfare experience.

A dogs behavior is determined not only by breed but by ownership. A Chihuahua can be dangerous dog in the wrong owners hands....you laugh but you should see the 15 year old Chihuahua that will bite you in a heartbeat currently at the shelter.

Under this bill:

An owner must prove a dog is not a pit bull. The state should have to prove the animal is a pit bull. If this bill passes and is enacted owning a pit bull is a crime. The last time I checked, the state has to prove its case, the alleged criminal doesn't have to prove its innocence.

If an animal is removed (and looks like it may be a pit bull) an owner has the right to a fair hearing. In the meantime, government run and privately run animal shelters will have to hold these animals. The number of dogs on the streets will increase. The wheels of justice are not speedy, animal shelters are already crowded and do they in turn, turn away animals because they have ~~no~~ ^{shelters} no room while the court case is going on or do they euthanize their population for room while the owners prove their dog is or is not a pit bull. Montana's shelters are

not infinite in their space. With this bill the state intends to use a shelter's space while they figure out what is or isn't a pit bull and then the shelters will bear the brunt of having ^{to} ~~the~~ euthanize these dogs. Veterinarians won't euthanize healthy dogs.

The burden of proving their dog is not a pit bull increases as the owner must pay for the room and board of the animal while the animal is held in the local shelter because of court action, initiated by local governments, under ^a new state law. Private shelters with government contracts will never recover that money.

Pit bulls are not the problem. Dog ownership is a responsibility not the breed. There are local ordinances on the books to handle vicious animals. Any of my dogs could be mean dogs ~~is~~ I allowed them to be or trained them to be such. What breed is next? Rottweilers, German Shepherds, Dobermans.....?

This legislation is fraught with costs to dog owners who have no papers on their animals. Their dog may be a mutt which just happens to look like a pit bull in someone's eyes. Are the officers of our state now going to have to become judges using the American Kennel Club purebred standards on mixed breed dogs? Don't they have criminals to catch? A vicious dog is a vicious dog of any breed. To pull one or two breeds out of the over 170 breeds of dogs and legislate their existence away is not going to solve a vicious dog problem. Local governments going after bad dogs of any breed and even worse owners....will. Is a person who really wants a "bully breed" not going to own one because of this legislation? Of course not, they can just move on to another breed and train it to be mean. It is the human element,

not the animal. I believe that people who own pit bulls do have more responsibility due to public perception. Our shelter spends many hours working with people on finding the right dog for their family. We do adopt out pit bulls and do so with as much care as with other breeds if not more because of public perception.

There is a reduction of incidences of dog bites and attacks when the population is being controlled through spay/neuter efforts. If the legislature wants to make Montana safer, instead of piling cases up in the court systems, why doesn't the legislature designate money to the reduction of animals in the state through spay/neuter organizations, such as Spay Montana.

There are better ways to meet this challenge head on. One breed is not the challenge. The challenge is education to create responsible owners, reduction of population and the will and funding to make it happen.